Establishing and Challenging Masculinity

The influence of gendered discourses in organized sport

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Abstract

This study examined how coaches and players constructed and regulated masculinity in organized sport. Using participant observation, we examined the role of discourses in the construction and regulation of sporting masculinity within a semi-professional British football (soccer) team. Two predominant discourses were present: (a) masculinity establishing discourse, and (b) masculinity challenging discourse; heuristic tools to understand the use of toxic language in the construction and maintenance of masculinity. Coaches frequently used discourses that drew on narratives of war, gender, and sexuality in order to facilitate aggressive and violent responses for enhancing athletic performance. However, we also found that these discourses have limited influence beyond the playing field, highlighting the segmentation of the sporting and social identities of these players, and a loosening of the traditional and empirically-evidenced ability of sports to socialize men into narrow forms of masculinity.

Keywords: heteromasculinity, masculinity, hegemony, football, soccer, discourse

The Purposes of Sport

The purposes and social functions of organized, competitive sport are multiple and contested. While men value sport as an opportunity to develop positive personal qualities such as teamwork, moral character, self-restraint, and a sense of fair play, contemporary gender/sport literature suggests that these valued outcomes are, for the most part, resilient myths of the locker room (Miracle & Rees, 1994). This is not to discount the central position that sport maintains in contemporary western culture; the meaning and significance that it may hold in the lives of individuals, or its potential for positive social impact. Nor is it to suggest that all the outcomes of sport are inherently negative. Some of the most salient benefits attributable to athletic participation include elevated self-esteem, improved school attendance, higher educational aspirations, higher rates of university attendance, and perhaps even greater chances of post-schooling employment (Carlson et al., 2005; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Jeziorski, 1994; Marsh, 1993; Sabo, Melnick & Vanfossen, 1989). Yet, we question whether the benefits associated with sporting participation are the result of something intrinsic to team sports, or whether they simply reflect the broader hegemonic dominance of some men (who excel in sport) over marginalized others (Anderson, 2005).

Regardless of whether or not sport delivers these aforementioned outcomes, it is perhaps more illuminating that western cultures *believe* they do. This belief is reflected in high parental encouragement rates and team sport participation rates. It is also institutionalized in Western countries where athletic programs are intertwined with public education, and where sport is part of the national curriculum (Gerdy, 2002; Miracle & Rees, 1994). This creates great cultural and institutional pressure for boys to participate in these types of sports (Anderson, 2005; Messner, 2002; Miracle & Rees, 1994; Plummer, 1999; Pollack, 1998).

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The Role of Sport in Relation to Masculinity

Sport first gained cultural recognition in Anglo-American countries as a valued leisurely pastime during the second industrial revolution. Here, it taught boys the docility to authority required in a capitalist economy (Carter, 2006; Rigauer, 1981). However, in a culture which conflated sexuality with gender expression, and where it was feared that feminine boys would become gay, sport also served as a mechanism of masculinization. At the time, this was considered a way to assure heterosexuality in male youth (Anderson, 2009).

Sport has also been central to the promotion and maintenance of men's dominance over women (Pronger, 1990). As women moved out of the domestic arena, men accomplished the reproduction of their privilege through displays of strength and violence. Sports proved particularly useful here; by embedding elements of competition and hierarchy among men, it justified their right to social dominance. Connell (1995) suggested that "Men's greater sporting prowess has [therefore] become…symbolic proof of superiority and right to rule" (p. 54).

But sport could only work in this capacity if women (formally) and gay men (culturally) were excluded from participation. If women and gay men also bashed their bodies and thumped their chests, men would be less equipped to lay claim to patriarchal and heterosexual privilege (Bryson, 1987). Without women's presence in sport, or the narratives of openly gay men, heterosexual men's greater sporting prowess served as *uncontested* proof of their superiority and right to masculine domination (Bourdieu, 2001).

Stratifying Men through Sport

While acknowledging how sport "proves" men's dominance over women and gay men, it is also necessary to examine the way sport privileges a particular subset of heterosexual men. Connell's (1987) theory of *hegemonic masculinity* describes a set of social practices of intra-masculine domination and marginalization that regulates the gendered behaviors of men. According to this theory, there are a host of achieved and ascribed attributes required to embody the hegemonically esteemed version of masculinity. However, scholars frequently confuse Connell's notion of hegemonic masculinity as a social process with

the archetype described as maintaining social dominance. Thus, in order to differentiate the archetype of hegemonic masculinity from hegemonic masculinity theory, we call the version of masculinity that has been typically esteemed in sporting cultures *orthodox masculinity* (Anderson, 2005, 2009).

While a number of attributes are required in orthodox masculinity, the principle conditions are that one be heterosexual and hyper-masculine. This combination is so strong that heterosexuality and masculinity are deemed synonymous; a cultural conflation that Pronger (1990) calls *heteromasculinity*. Thus men compete for hegemonic dominance by showing overt physical prowess (Messner, 1992), using sexism and femphobia to distance themselves from association with femininity (Pronger, 1990), deploying homophobia to distance themselves from homosexuality (Anderson, 2002), and committing physical violence against themselves and others (Kelly & Waddington, 2006; Parker, 1996); all in order to raise their masculine capital among peers.

Sport has traditionally served as a socially esteemed institution where boys formally learn these attitudinal components (Kimmel, 1994; Pharr, 1997), something Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) describe as "toxic practices" of masculinity (p. 840). Here, boys and men are thought to employ the processes of hegemonic oppression to construct socially esteemed identities (predicated on being heterosexual and masculine), in an effort to maintain or improve their position within the social stratification. Giulianotti (1999), therefore, describes sporting masculinity as "uniformly aggressive and humorlessly chauvinistic" (p. 155).

The Changing Role of Homophobia in Stratifying Men

In order to construct a socially esteemed masculine identity, however, it is necessary not only to publicly demonstrate heterosexuality and masculinity, but also to police the sexual and gendered lives of one's peers. Accordingly, considerable research on masculinity documents the multitude of ways boys and men police gender and sexuality through discourse. Much of this comes by threatening to unveil others as "sissies" (Kimmel, 1994; Messerschmidt, 2000), "fags" (Pascoe, 2005; Plummer, 1999), and "poofs"[1] (Parker, 1996; Roderick, Waddington & Parker, 2000), and through the use of other emasculating and homosexualizing epithets (Cushion & Jones, 2006). In sport, players who do not live up

to the expected orthodox scripts of masculinity are often subordinated through physical dominance and ridicule. Traditionally, competitive team sports have therefore actively constructed men to value and reproduce orthodox notions of masculinity.

Despite decades of overt homophobia and misogyny, there is also considerable evidence that more progressive attitudes are being embraced in multiple sport settings (Anderson 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2009; Harris & Clayton, 2007; Price & Parker, 2003; Pringle & Markula, 2005; Southall et al. 2009). For example, Anderson (2005) documented how declining cultural homophobia helped influence openly gay athletes to come out to their high school and university teams. Here, they were able to use their sexual non-conformity to further contest forms of orthodox masculinity.

Furthermore, in December, 2009, the Welsh rugby union player, Gareth Thomas, publicly announced that he was gay. This made Thomas the first openly gay professional rugby player still playing in Britain. The reaction from rugby fans, teammates, and opposing players, as documented in the media, was supportive. Indicative of this, Thomas revealed the reaction of two of his teammates when they were told he was gay: "…they came in, patted me on the back and said, 'We don't care. Why didn't you tell us before?' Two of my best mates in rugby didn't even blink an eyelid" (Walsh, 2009, p. 32).

Given that relationships are constituted in communication practices (Baxter, 2004), this study examined the use of sexual and gendered discourses on the construction of gendered practices in a micro-level "interactional arena" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p.126). We compare the traditional use of homophobic and misogynistic discourses among football players (as established through existing literature) with the discourses that these men encounter and utilize as part of their everyday sporting experience. Specifically, we ask: How does sport interact with masculinity? What discourses are present in this interaction? Who utilizes these discourses? What power dynamics are at play? Do these discourses contribute to the construction and maintenance of masculine identities in this specific sporting locale?

Method

Access

Whilst football (soccer) does not exist as a highly masculinized sport in the United States,

football is considered a highly masculine endeavor throughout much of the world. Messner (2002) suggests that sports, such as football, serve at the center of masculine production for all boys and men in western cultures; thus, a semi-professional football team is a strategically positioned sample. The players on this team represent men on the way up, those who are more likely to over-conform to team norms in the hope of being selected for promotion to the next level of play. They exist within what Anderson (2005) describes as a near-total institution of masculine orthodoxy; so, if a shift in the production of masculine identity can be found, it might make a compelling case for the theoretical generalization of a similar shift in other levels of play. However, issues of access have traditionally made it difficult to penetrate the closed community of association football. Accordingly, there have been very few studies emerging from this level of play (Roderick, 2006; Roderick, Waddington & Parker, 2000; Waddington, Roderick & Parker, 1999; Waddington, Roderick & Naik, 2001). This research, therefore, facilitates a rare, in-depth study of a small group of semi-professional football players in their everyday sporting and non-sporting contexts.

Participants

We used qualitative methods, which included extended periods of participant observation (in both sporting and non-sporting settings) and informal interviews, to study 22 players of a semi-professional football team located in the southwest region of England. Concurrent with other research that examines discourses through ethnography, both in sport (Clayton & Humberstone, 2006; Cushion & Jones, 2006; Holt & Sparkes, 2001) and in other settings (Pascoe, 2005), we used these methods to generate a richness of data that is required to (a) examine the deployment of discourses in this social location, and (b) situate the role of these discourses in the construction of masculinities among these heterosexual sporting men.

The players, between 18 and 25 years of age, were a fairly homogenous group. Most were white, English, and were from working class backgrounds; three players were black, and one identified with Middle-Eastern origins. All players self-identifed as heterosexual; sixteen were either full or part-time university students. In order to reduce any interference with their football, most were encouraged to academically purse a foundation degree (the equivalent of an Associates of Arts degree in the United

States) instead of a bachelor's degree; no players attended fee-paying public (private) schools. Most were supported financially by university scholarships for sport. Thus, their relative youth and their student status might make these men more tolerant than what might be typically found in other semi-professional football teams.

The coaches, between 36 and 42 years of age, consisted of one head coach and two assistant coaches; the assistant coaches were ex-professional football players in England. These men were all white, English, and identified themselves as heterosexual. They attended all games, conducted training, gave team talks, and liaised about team selection, with the final selection decisions being made by the head coach.

The team competed each Saturday afternoon in a competitive regional league; part of the national amateur structure of football in England. Teams who were successful at this amateur level could progress into the professional ranks. In recent years, some of the players representing this club had moved on to the professional leagues.

After securing the signed consent of players and coaches, the primary author (already an accomplished soccer player on the team) utilized his unique sporting position to occupy the ethnographic intentions of this study. This involved him continuing to play football for this team while engaging in fieldwork. This enabled him to achieve legitimate access to the private and public interactions of this competitive football team. This insider status was maintained throughout the data collection process (August 2007 to May 2008).

Observations

To maintain the insider status of the first author, athletes did not undergo formal interviews; instead, data concerning-masculinity making were obtained primarily during naturally-occurring participant observations (Maxwell, 2004). The observation of direct behavior, in the actual setting, served as an important way to contextualize the gendered and sexualized deployment, heteronormativity, and interpretation of the discourses exchanged within this specific site.

The intimate personal immersion of the primary author within this football subculture generated

considerable amounts of observational data in the form of field notes. This immersion informed our examination of how such discourses were used in processes of masculinity-building. All of the primary author's note-taking was conducted in private (Spradley, 1970). Notes were often recorded using recall after leaving the presence of teammates. On other occasions, the primary author made notes by using his mobile phone to text messages to himself;[2] for example, in the club bar, or from the restroom in the locker room. To follow a controlled method of recording, managing and interpreting fieldnotes, annotations were recorded as quickly (and in as much detail) as possible after the event. On days when note-taking occurred, the primary author also systematically spent an hour or two writing them up and making some initial interpretations (Barnard, 2002). Furthermore, time was taken to reflect upon earlier steps, using a method of making notes upon notes (Holt & Sparkes, 2001). All of this contributes to what we perceive to be a cyclical (rather than a linear) method of ethnographic interpretation (Delamont, 2004).

Researcher Subjectivities

Since "the researcher is the main research tool" in qualitative research (Holloway, 1997, p.136), it is important to examine our respective researcher positions in relation to this study. Holt and Sparkes (2001) suggest that subjectivities constitute a rich insight into the analytical choices that researchers make in understanding and representing the social world being investigated, and, therefore, should be embraced as a valuable analytical tool. Thus, we note that the three authors represent vastly differing standpoints in relation to sport. The first author is a heterosexual graduate student-athlete who is a semi-professional soccer player. The second is an openly gay sociologist and coach who remains quite critical of the power embedded within the interactions of men's team sports. The third author is an openly gay graduate student interested in issues of gender, sexuality, and education, who has always been critical of sport's ability to marginalize others. Together we adopted a triangulated approach toward understanding the gendered perspectives and heterosexualized interactions of the men on this particular team (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

The participant observation portion of this research was conducted solely by the primary author, who matched the demographic makeup of the team. He is white, heterosexual, within the age range of the

other players (23), and he maintains substantial experience in the sport. The authenticity of the primary researcher was positively influenced by his football skills, as was established through his previous performance as a semi-professional player, and through being a playing member of this team before this research began. Thus, as a football player of proven worth to this team (rather than as an outside researcher having to "pass" as a player), social legitimacy was secured, granting researcher access to a world of (a) participation practice, (b) social and cultural practices, and (c) interaction data that would be typically unavailable to most other researchers. This researcher was also cognizant of the local uses and meanings of "shop talk," giving him a reference from which to judge the use of much of the discursive actions and practices analyzed (Cushion & Jones, 2006). He, essentially, was one of "them."

Thus, from an interpretative perspective, the primary researcher's experience within the semi-professional football setting, combined with his prolonged period of face-to-face contact with the players and coaches on this team, facilitated his ability to interpret the intentions of their discursive actions and practices. Further, it facilitated his ability to recognize what discourses were being mobilized and/or enacted in given contexts. In other words, his knowledge and experience in this setting allowed him to more accurately "interpret and follow the rules that govern the practices of the field and to understand (and make explicit) its structures of meaning" (Oberhuber & Krzyzanowski, 2008, p.188).

Inhabiting multiple roles as researcher, non-researcher, football player, and friend provided the primary author the opportunity to spend time with the players and coaches while simultaneously observing and documenting their use of language in multiple situations[3]. Taking part in the team's shared culture fostered a better understanding of their constructed experiences and meanings (Holt & Sparkes, 2001) where all of this in-depth data could be obtained with minimal researcher effect (Barnard, 2002). However, the primary author's familiarity with the players on this team opened up issues of subjective bias, particularly concerning the coding (for meaning) of data. Thus, self-reflexivity and critical discussion with the other authors strengthened the overall validity of the reported findings (Davies, 1999).

Coding and Analytical Framework

This research was approached through an inductive stance, treating the discourse in each

interaction as potentially meaningful (Oberhuber & Krzyzanowski, 2008); thus prompting an 'emerging' and on-going quality to the analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). While we did not approach this research with a predetermined thematic framework, into which we could simply "plug in" the data generated, this research was inspired by the personal experiences of the primary researcher which, in turn, influenced the processes of data collection, analysis, interpretation, and the presentation of selected data. The reported data represented both (a) coach-player and (b) player-player interactions that surfaced within an active and naturally unfolding football context (Clayton & Humberstone, 2006). Notes were selected on the basis of (a) revealing insight into the players' enactment and management of multiple and contradictory forms of masculinity, and (b) their participation in constructing and maintaining or resisting and undermining these forms of masculinity.

After the primary author made initial interpretations of the field notes/data as they emerged, this mediated-data[4] were then re-coded and re-interpreted upon data collection completion. This was done to cross-check the original field notes with the initial interpretations to monitor if there were any changes in how the original field notes were being interpreted. Mediated research notes, including the primary author's initial interpretations, were then cross-verified with the second and third authors in order to maximize validity and reliability of data. These authors acted as "devil's advocates;" questioning the primary author's initial analysis (Krane, Anderson & Stean, 1997), until agreement over the coding and the interpretation of data was achieved. Thus, coding and analysis of the data in this research occurred in three phases: two phases by the primary author (both *during* and *after* the period of data collection), and one phase by the secondary authors. Rather than offering "generalizable" findings, we recognize the inherent limitations of this respective ethnographic case study approach, and instead present our research as personally and theoretically informed interpretations of the discourses that were at play in this specific interactional arena of sport.

Analysis

This research explored the discursive practices of both coaches and players on a semi-professional male football team in the UK. We analyzed the circulation of what we term *masculinity*

establishing discourse and *masculinity challenging discourse*, explicating these concepts as heuristic tools to understand the role of discourses in the (re)construction and maintenance of systematic sets of gendered practices. As the forthcoming analyses suggest, neither masculinity establishing discourse nor masculinity challenging discourse maintains total influence over the players in this study, as players occasionally resisted and challenged their coaches over the inherent function of this discourse.

Masculinity Establishing Discourse

Sport has traditionally served as a vessel for the generational transmission of homophobic, misogynistic, and femphobic attitudes, where boys and men are socialized to exhibit toughness, violence, and aggression (Dunning, 1999). We suggest that the coaches on this football team perpetuate this orthodox ethos of sport through the use of what we call *masculinity establishing discourse*. Putting this discourse into action functions to (re)establish football as a masculine sport and, through a process of regulating, disciplining, and policing, it (re)defines the perimeters of the (toxic) behaviors and attitudes that constitute (orthodox) masculinity.

There are numerous, often overlapping, forms of masculinity establishing discourse. One form is to situate football as a sport specifically for men, despite the fact that women play the same game, by the same rules. Highlighting this usage, in the locker room at half-time, one of the coaches shouted to his athletes, "This is a man's game!" He added, "If you haven't got the balls for it, there's a women's team you can play on." The athletes listened to this tirade submissively, with their heads hung low.

While this "man's game" narrative is frequently employed by coaches to chastise athletes, it is also used in less intense emotional moments. For example, the coaches often watched a Premier League football match (the elite professional league in England) with their players on the TV in the team's club-house before their own game. One time, a fellow patron (not a member of the team) commented that the referee missed an "obvious foul." The coach challenged him, saying, "It's a man's game, mate. There's going to be some contact." Even in informal moments like this, football was presented as a physical and aggressive masculine endeavor.

Not only did the coaches establish football as a "man's game," they also suggested the men who

play it have to be so masculine that they are "warriors." Ostensibly, this is done to "motivate" players to be successful on the field. The coaches, for example, frequently asserted that football players must maintain what the head coach called "a warrior attitude." This warrior narrative, noted by Jansen and Sabo (1994), established a guideline of on-field masculinity within which orthodox behaviors are framed as desirable. Highlighting the deployment of this discourse, in the initial team meeting, the head coach said:

> There are two things we judge players by. The first is your playing ability, and the second is whether you're a warrior or not. We need players who are willing to spill blood and die for this team. If we go into battle and you are not willing to die, then we'll get you off [the field] quickly.

The establishing of players as warriors was not, however, a one-time opening diatribe of team expectations. Both the head and the two assistant coaches regularly shouted instructions to players that were heavily saturated with references to bodily sacrifice and violent physical acts. "Slit their fuckin' throats!" a coach screamed in attempt to influence the players to keep up the physical pressure on their opponents. And, after what he considered to be a poor practice session, an assistant coach said, "We want to see more players coming off the pitch [field] with blood on their shirts." Coaches also frequently encouraged their players to tackle so aggressively that the opposition "will know that they've been in a battle."

Homophobia, misogyny, and extreme sexual violence pervaded the language that the coaches used in attempts to install the warrior attitude in their players. For example, a coach said, "If this was a war, you'd put a bullet in the cunt's head. But it's not, its football [soccer], so stick a boot in on him next time." Another coach yelled to his players, "Go out there and dominate them. Bend them over and fuckin' rape them!" In frustration, a coach shouted, "When you get the opportunity you've got to take your chances. Don't fuck it up. Don't be a fucking poof!" Another yelled, "You go out there and finish them off! You've got to cut their balls off!"

Thus, in this section, we described masculinity establishing discourse as the set of practices that constitute football as a man's game, and delimit the behaviors that make a player suitable for the game.

For these coaches, the warrior attitude included homophobia, misogyny and violence, positions which (as they communicated from the sidelines) they apparently deemed fundamental to becoming and being a worthy football player.

Masculinity Challenging Discourse

The coaches mapped out football as a game played by 'real men' through masculinity establishing discourse. However, the coaches also regulated players when they failed to live up to these standards. We conceptualize this systematic set of practices as *masculinity challenging discourse*.

Masculinity challenging discourse served as a mechanism for gender and player performance regulation, when coaches felt that their players had not attained the appropriate form of masculinity established for them. Thus, it was used as a disciplinary strategy over the players. It should not, however, be misunderstood as discourse used to resist or challenge the hegemonic (orthodox) form of masculinity. For example, during one game's half time—and with his team trailing by two goals—the head coach focused on one of his players to reprove his 'weak' performance:

> "You! No bollocks. If you get kicked, you get up and get on with it. You don't go in a sulk and start whining like a little girl. Stand up for yourself, get stuck in and start showing you're a man. Now you've really got to grow some balls because otherwise they'll walk all over you."

As the athlete left the locker room, for the second half, the player responded by banging his fist against the open door, a cue we interpret as letting others know he is now "pumped up." In similar circumstances, on other occasions, one player was observed forcefully throwing his water bottle at the wall, and another player kicked a hole into the wooden door of a locker room.

As evidenced in this example, the coaches also combined anti-femininity with male genitalia in their masculinity challenging rebukes. Highlighting this, in times of heightened emotion and frustration, it was extremely common to hear coaches say, "Grow some balls," or 'What are you, a pussy?" But an even more effective admonition was to question the players' heterosexuality. "What are you, a poof?" the coach screamed, "Cos you're acting like one!"

Observations evidenced that these messages were less frequent than the "man's game" or warrior narratives, as this specific expression of masculinity challenging discourse was not used on a day-to-day basis (in a one monthly period, eight moments were observed where this discourse was brought into play; in another month, only three). However, while this is not to deny the intensity of these messages, it is also misleading to infer a consistent frequency from such statistics, since the coach may not invoke this discourse for weeks at a time. When the team was winning during this period, this discourse was not always explicitly utilized; instead, it lay dormant within the asymmetry of the coach-player relationship. The players were cognizant of this discourse, even when it was not in immediate use, and the primary author observed some predictability in its deployment. Indeed, there was an elevated use of all examples of gendered discourses in competitive games.

Masculinity challenging discourse often had the desired effect; players seemed to expel extra effort when the coaches questioned their heteromasculinity. They responded in ways that masculinity establishing discourse alone did not seem to provoke. We note, however, that this increased effort did not necessarily improve performance. Individual players perform best under varying degrees of emotional arousal. Being angry or irritated is not always the best mindset for optimal performance (Gould, Greenleaf, & Krane, 2002).

Masculinity challenging discourse is also characterized through homophobic, misogynistic, and other insults that question the heteromasculinity of men who stray from the strictures of orthodox masculinity. The coaches deployed it against men whom they felt did not sufficiently embody the orthodox warrior attitude that they considered integral to football masculinity. Although, on its own, the hypermasculine hyperbole of masculinity establishing discourse seemed ineffectual, the orthodox framework of esteemed masculinity that it constructs allowed the coaches to individually question the masculinity of their players.

Irrespective of whether this increased aggression helped individual performance or not, of importance for this research, players responded to this discourse. Accordingly, the players used the football field to demonstrate, when challenged, that they were in fact 'real men.' Players were afforded

little other choice than to rise to their coaches' masculinizing challenge if they were to (a) save face in front of their teammates, (b) avoid further individual feminizing and homosexualizing ridicule, (c) keep their place in the team and thus be financially rewarded, and (d) not "let the team down."

The association of this discourse with perceived effectiveness in improving performance may be one reason why the coaches also used this technique on the team as a collective. For example, during one "motivational" half-time speech, a coach said, "I don't know what you're doing out there, they're all over you. Now show some balls and stop acting like a bunch of fuckin' tarts." Here, a collective team-wide challenge was issued using associations of femininity, genitalia, and lack of courage. However, we point out that there is no measurable way to determine if this type of discourse influenced members of the team to improve their effort (as there is no control variable). We nonetheless speculate that it did not have the same effect as when one was selected out to be rebuked by the coaches individually. This is because a collective rebuke permits individuals to believe the coach's tirade is not intended to implicate them personally; but instead to question the efforts of their teammates.

Two other examples of this discourse deployed by the coaches served to represent the opposition as either hyper-masculine or as feminine. For example, one coach said, "If you give these fuckers a chance they'll steal your wallet, your car and the next thing you know they'll have your girlfriend, too. Don't let that bunch of cunts take this away from you." However, coaches also (and sometimes simultaneously) questioned the masculinity of their opponents. For example, one coach referred to members of the opposing team as "a bunch of fucking girls."

In these examples, the coaches were challenging their own players' masculinity, and the intent of this strategy was the same; to position players as needing to manage their (orthodox) masculinity. However, the way in which the coaches addressed the gendered position of their opponents functioned to construct the threat from the opposition in different ways. First, to be beaten by girls is to undermine the opposition as feminine "girls." The threat to one's masculinity is constructed in relation to the feminized action of others, where the risk is a loss of masculinity. Similarly, the threat of having one's girlfriend "stolen" constructs the opposition as alpha-male types. In this example, the action of the opposition is

masculinized by the coach's discourse, rendering his own team at risk of losing the trappings of masculinity. In other words, the challenges were constructed in different ways; one feminized the opposition, and one masculinized the opposition. Both tactics invoked the players to position themselves on a hegemonic ladder of sorts, where their constant struggle to (re)prove themselves masculine required them to either fend off challenges from below (feminine girls) or to strive to compete with those above (hegemonic alpha-male types).

These examples highlight how the coaches desired that that players constantly prove that they can maintain a hyper-masculine image, since even the most traditionally masculine players were not safe from having their masculinity challenged. Regardless of the level of aggression or violence they had previously shown, a coach could temporarily void a player's masculinity with this type of discourse. In other words, despite having a high degree of masculine capital, publicly-perceived masculinity could be easily undone through failure to live up to a masculine challenge. The masculinity challenging discourse therefore led to the normalizing of aggressive behaviors, which individuals employed to "defend" themselves in response to challenges to their masculinity, and subsequently reinforced orthodox attitudes and behaviors as group norms established by masculinity establishing discourse.

Athletes' Use of Masculinity Challenging Discourse

Although predominantly used by the coaches, most of the players also employed masculinity challenging discourse. The players used masculinity challenging discourse to question each other's dedication or effort; particularly when their behaviors were deemed detrimental to performance. For example, after a dispute between Max and one of the coaches, Jamie (another player) interrupted the conversation, saying to Max, "Just be quiet. Be a man. Shut up and stop whining." For many of the players, "being a man" is predicated on accepting the word of the coach without question, and proving one's worth physically on the field. Not conforming to this hyper-masculine gender norm is considered to be letting the team down. This is consistent with research which suggests that loyalty to other men (Russell, 1999), aggression (Harris & Clayton, 2007), and obeying authority (Cushion & Jones, 2006) are celebrated by men as characteristics of masculinity in wider football culture.

A good example of the utility of masculinity challenging discourse between players occurred during a small-sided game (where members of the same team were divided into two numerically-smaller teams to play against each other). Steve, who was a recipient of a particularly aggressive tackle from Mike, complained to the supervising coach, asking for a free-kick to be given in his favor for what he believed to be a foul. Feeling his tackle was legitimate, Mike said, "Fuck off, you poof. I hardly touched you. Get on with it and stop being such a shit-house [an English euphemism for sissy or coward]." Steve responded by shoving Mike and beckoning him to fight. The coach, referring to the day of their next league match, stopped the escalating violence, "Lads, save it for Saturday!"

This example highlights the mechanisms of masculinity challenging discourse, because in order to legitimize his aggressive tactics (and avoid losing a free kick for what he likely knows was an unskilled and inappropriate challenge), Mike relied on the image of the aggressive and violent man; the way his coaches desire. This reframed the arguments from one which might address the notion that Mike made a poor challenge, to one which instead cast doubt onto the masculinity and heterosexuality of Steve, who complained about the challenge. Accordingly, the onus was on Steve to prove that his call was legitimate, and was not a sign of masculine weakness. This influenced him to respond with equal (or greater) masculinity challenging discourse and/or actual (or at least threats of) physical violence. Accordingly, in this football culture, where aggression and violence are often esteemed, failing to react aggressively to this accusation of homosexuality or femininity means that one is more likely to be subordinated in the masculine hierarchy.

Finally, masculinity challenging discourse was also used between players of opposing teams. Standing over an injured opposition player (who was knocked to the ground), Jonathan snarled to his opponent, "You're not so fuckin' tough now are you?" The phrase—"Get up you pussy"—was also frequently used between opposing players, and use of homonegative language was also common. In one example, after a free kick was awarded to the opposition, and with a player lying on the ground, injured, an opposing player stood over him, once again reframing the argument (in a self-defensive fashion) from one which might address the legality of the challenge to one which both questions the masculinity and

integrity of his opponent, saying, "Get up you fuckin' bender.[5] I didn't even touch you."

These examples demonstrate how, by attempting to dominate other men (and challenging their established masculinity) these players build their masculine credit at the expense of opposing players. This highlights that this football setting is much more than just an arena in which these men learn masculinity, it is also an arena in which their masculinity is stratified through success and failure, violence, and subordination. Those who prevail are not those who work the hardest or maintain the best camaraderie. Instead, they are those who *win*. Conversely, losing (not just losing a game, but losing an individual tackle, "challenge," or "battle") is associated with "softness" and "weakness;" traits thought to be typically synonymous with femininity.

Resistance

Although warrior narratives maintained some credence with these players, neither masculinity establishing discourse nor masculinity challenging discourse maintained total influence. First, athletes frequently ignored their coaches. But, on occasion, the players also actively resisted the masculinity establishing discourses of the coaches, making fun of their hypermasculine warrior narratives. For example, after a coach screamed, "Knock his fucking head off," one of the men on the sidelines, almost in disbelief, turned to his teammate and sarcastically said, "Fuck me, is he sure? Why don't we just hunt them down or set fire to their [team] bus while we're at it?" Both this exchange and the dialogue of Nick and his teammates (below) can be interpreted as examples of resistance, in the form of jocular banter. Baxter (2004) describes such exchanges as "particularly frequent kinds of mundane events in the construction of relationships…that enable parties to build jointly a shared history" (p. 4) Further, rather than simply inducing a cheap laugh from teammates, this resistance provided a counter-point to those practices that are simply acts of participation and reproduction. It challenged the main definitions and practices of (dominant) gendered discourses and deployed and/or enacted alternative definitions and meanings.

It is perhaps because of the impossibility of these orders (not least because of their illegality), that the warrior narratives of masculinity establishing discourse did not influence the players to purposefully

engage in these obscene acts of violence. While they may have occasionally contested and defended dangerous tackles with misogynistic and homophobic discourse, they did not intentionally foul other players in response to their coaches' calls.

Masculinity challenging discourse also has its limits as a tool of gender regulation. On one occasion, the coach was increasingly unhappy with the team's performance. He told Liam to prepare for substitution, saying, "We need a real man out there. Someone who's not afraid to smash some people around and get hurt." The assistant coach nodded agreeably. But, as Liam prepared, Nick, a remaining sub, provided resistance. Here, this takes the form of a critical message exchanged *between* the players to mock the coaches' seriousness. Nick jokes to his fellow benchwarmers, "If it's 'real men' he wants, then that counts me out!" The other men on the bench stifled their smiles at this self-deprecating quip, nodding in agreement, sharing the sentiment that they too did not desire to be *that* masculine; acknowledging the irony that a "real man" being selected from among those men were already deemed not "man enough" to play (as they all were on the bench).

It could be argued that, in contrast to the "heroic position" of masculinity that the coach called for, these men separated themselves from the conventions of orthodox masculinity in favor of a more ordinary position of masculinity (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). As Speer (2001) writes, "Rather than align with macho ideals, these men emphasize normality and ordinariness" (p.110). It can be argued that the assertiveness and determination required to reject a discourse of people in power is, in and of itself, a demonstration of masculine characteristics. But the fact that players do not overtly contest the coaches suggests this is not an entirely satisfactory answer.

Indeed, while the players sometimes challenged each others' masculinity on the field, it is highly significant that this hypermasculine posturing was left within the white-lined boundaries of the playing field. This was true even when the men performed traditionally feminine tasks. These players did not aggressively challenge each other's masculinity when applying what would be traditionally considered feminine skin and hair products (such as tanning lotions and conditioners), donning pastel-colored cardigan sweaters, skinny-jeans, and other feminized fashion accessories (such as colorful bead-bracelets,

Arabic-style scarves, or one-strap satchels), or when emoting or being physically tactile with one another. Players talked about clothes, moisturizers, and music, as much as they talked about football and sex; thus their actual use of masculinity challenging discourse, or questioning of each others' sexuality when doing so, was marginal. In other words, once the game was over, they exhibited more metrosexual gendered behaviors.

While athletes occasionally used the phrase, "that's so gay," they did not call each other "poofs," or challenge each other to be "real men" in other social contexts. When such phrases were used, ironically and humorously, the phrase "that's so gay" appeared to disparage gayness and have homonegative connotations. Highlighting the ambiguity of the functions and intentions of such discourse in this part of England, McCormack and Anderson (2010) suggest that "gay" is used to indicate something undesirable or negative, but that its sexual component and its usage to overtly admonish homosexual behaviors or relationships has largely been removed from use in some UK youth cultures today.

The lack of intellectualized homophobia outside of sport is a further indicator of how these men left orthodox notions of masculinity on the field. They did not seem to intellectualize homophobia in any way. Many of the men had gay friends, several of the players had attended local gay bars and clubs, and many were observed as not being afraid to be associated with homosexuality through their intimate, homosocial tactility; as players frequently hugged (and sometimes even kissed) each other in public (Anderson, 2009). Accordingly, while the masculinity that these athletes exhibited outside of sport is notably lacking the homophobia, sexism, and violence found in the sporting setting, their lack of agency in organizing sport highlights their docility to authority and continues to position them as complicit towards orthodox masculinity in the sport setting.

The relative absence of homophobia, misogyny, and violence outside of sport, as opposed to its relative saturation in the locker room and on the field, suggests that the deployment of masculinity challenging discourse among these men (players and coaches) has shifted toward being primarily a sporting *technique*, or, at least a form that has narrower relevance outside of the structure of sport. In this

respect, players' violent behaviors and discourses are predominantly situated in the realm of *sport*, rather than gender *per se*. It is the systematic practices and the cultural and organizational restraints of organized *football* which establishes this as appropriate sporting masculinity, thus making it possible for these coaches to challenge their players to exhibit such toxic practices on the field. With regard to the detachment of their on-field and off-field masculinities, we suggest that there is increasing truth to the commonplace notion that the use of such violent, homophobic, and sexist language really is "just part of the game."

Discussion

In examining the construction and regulation of masculinity on a semi-professional British football team, we found that the coaches and athletes deploy two types of discourse to (re)construct themselves and other men according to systematic sets of gendered practices. We collectively refer to these as *gendered discourses*, and delineate two mutually enforcing forms: (a) *masculinity establishing discourse* and (b) *masculinity challenging discourse*. It is only through the dialectical interplay of these discourses that either can be effective. Although not inducing players to literally carry out the hyper-aggressive demands of their coaches, we speculate that this interplay serves to construct esteemed masculine scripts, and influence participants' masculine identities, to align with the aggressive playing style expected by their coaches.

Our notions of masculinity establishing discourse and masculinity challenging discourse contribute to the literature on sport and masculinities because they conceptualize, as a systematic set of processes, a broad range of factors that construct and regulate gendered behaviors in sport. In this specific setting, the coaches' combined use of these gendered discourses established an appropriate framework of masculine behavior, and a mechanism for its regulation.

The in-sport discourses observed here are consistent with previous research showing that football is utilized as a site for the demonstration and development of toughness, violence, and aggression (Dunning, 1999). Thus, we see that an important way these men (re)proved themselves is through the fluid exchange of masculinity challenging discourse, which they used as a tool to merge images of player competency

with hegemonic (orthodox) notions of masculinity. Here, being called a "poof" not only challenged their sexuality, but it also invoked questions about one's masculinity and one's sporting prowess. Accordingly, homophobia is not just homophobia, and misogyny is not just misogyny—they are inextricably tied with issues of gender, sexuality, courage, and sport in this context.

In this research, we simultaneously identified both the resistance and the (re)production of gendered discourses. Masculinity establishing and challenging discourses were frequently used inside of their sport but they were also used to contest various discourses (and bodily practices) of resistance. The players contested masculinity challenging discourse in subtle and non-confrontational ways. At one level, they were complicit with the coaches by not actively challenging their homophobic, misogynistic, and violent comments or commands. However, it is also important to recognize how small acts of (sometimes invisible) protest served to bond players together against their coaches.

Notably, since these dialogues occurred openly and welcomingly between players, they appeared useful in constructing and reinforcing their closeness. Furthermore, these mundane 'jokey' exchanges served to implicitly exclude the coaches, to remove them from the dialogue, and mark them as outsiders. The examples we provide of coach-player interaction highlight the asymmetry of their relationship, and show that masculinity challenging discourse has the potential to damage team communication and cohesiveness.

We also argue that the coaches' use of gendered discourses constricts any potential dialogue from existing between coach and athlete. Far from positioning themselves as occupying an invitational stance, and encouraging the mutual and welcoming exchange of messages (a position that Baxter [2004] would suggest is required to foster a productive and bona fide dialogue between coach and player), this discourse thus functions to further reinforce the asymmetry of the coach-athlete relationship. In the process, the possibility of a productive relationship forming may be stifled, hidden critiques of the coach may be further encouraged, and greater social distance between coach and player may be created.

By mocking the masculinity discourse of the coaches, we suggest these players demonstrate a knowledge of their roles in this interactional arena, and a resistance to maintaining the dynamic between

what Baxter (2004) calls "persuaders" and "targets of persuasion" (p. 16). That is, the players do not set out to contest their coaches, but they are not willing to passively accept the coaches' positions either. In Bakhtinian (1984) terms, the above example demonstrates how the players can "carnivalesque" this sports setting in order to maintain their own values, while simultaneously persuading the coach that they are authentic and genuine team players. In other words, they demonstrate that they "buy into" the coach's message, as they simultaneously resist and distance themselves from it.

It should also be noted that masculinity challenging discourse is *required* to police the orthodox forms of masculinity. While masculinity establishing discourse lays the ground work for orthodox masculinity, we suggest that masculinity establishing discourse does not work in-and-of-itself for two reasons. First, this discourse is quite familiar to these athletes. They have been socialized into this type of sport discourse since they were young, as it has become acceptable and commonplace at the youth levels of football in the UK (Cushion & Jones, 2006). Accordingly, the athletes in this study seem to have grown somewhat desensitized to it. The second reason is because this discourse does not attack players individually. While the warrior narratives of masculinity establishing discourse may be a displaced battle cry, they are not an admonition of the players as individuals.

Although our critical analysis locates problematic effects of such discourses used by coaches and players, we also recognize the possibility that some acts have unintended consequences which may systematically feedback to be the unacknowledged conditions of further actions (Giddens, 1984). In other words, the perpetrators of masculinity establishing and masculinity challenging discourses do not always intend the consequences they (re)produce. However, whether intended or not, coaches are agents in the construction of their players' masculinities and, in turn, players (who utilize the same discourses) are also agents in this (re)production. Even if athletes or coaches intellectually object the use of this discourse, the perceived enhancement this discourse has on player effort, combined with the history of gendered (often toxic) language in the sport, reinforces their use of it and adds inertia to the tradition (Giddens, 1984). Coaches continue to use it, and players continue to respond to it; perhaps in part because of the expectations of others in fulfilling their perceived duties.

The findings also demonstrate the existence of segmented and contradictory on-field/off-field masculine identities for these players. In other words, the athletes on this team model some aspects of hegemonic (orthodox) masculinity when in sport, but distance themselves from it outside of sport. Of course, we cannot empirically validate whether or not there may be leakage of gendered discourses from the field into *all* areas of these athletes' lives. However, observations of the other areas of their lives, to which the primary author was privy, suggests that there is little leakage. Explicating this, outside of sport these men were observed to be socially inclusive of gay men; they typically avoided violence and aggression, and they avoided the discourses associated with both of these.

This, then, may be a contradictory sporting case, one in which the interplay of gendered discourses and toxic practices on the field contrasts with their non-sporting lives. Of course, this finding is germane solely to this team; a group of predominantly white men, who have previously been shown to be low in homohysteria (Anderson, 2009). Thus, the unique demographics of this team might be a contributing factor in the function of their discourse, and it would be interesting to see if this finding is replicated in other teams who are representative of other socio-economic status' and educational levels. While recognizing the limitations of our specific data and its subsequent (lack of) generalizability, we nonetheless present this as a new and important finding on team sport athlete research, as it tentatively suggests that the gendered discourses of organized, competitive team sports might be losing their ability to culturally (re)produce hegemonic (orthodox) masculinity outside of athletes playing spaces.

Finally, we have already discussed that coaches may continue to use this discourse because of inertia and history (Giddens1984), but we theorize another reason why masculinity challenging discourse may still work among the players within this sport setting. First, we suggest that athletes may use it, partially, to remain compliant, as the coaches maintain the ability to punish players who contest them; something social psychologists describe as a learned inhibition against confronting a more powerful target (Brown, 2000). These athletes, moreover, certainly live with the ever-present threat of being deselected. Further, because these players are semi-professional, they argue they have "no choice" as this is also about securing an income. According to this model, rationality is added to the use of gendered discourses

through the conflation of reasons and needs. This conflation facilitates a coach-dominated coach-athlete relationship (an asymmetry) that lacks multivocality (Baxter, 2004), and therefore serves to construct an ideology of the good football player as one who compliantly "does" orthodox masculinity. However, we also offer a more problematic reading of the "no choice argument," suggesting that these players may not be totally without agency in this social exchange. Instead, pleading "no choice" may offer an alternative (but not necessarily intended) way for these men to (re)invoke more traditional and orthodox forms of masculinity without having to admit to their own homophobia, femphobia, and violent aggression; tenets that are increasingly unacceptable within youth culture.

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Notes

1. The urban dictionary online defines the expression “Poof” as “The British word for a homosexual.”
2. It is useful to note here that texting has been a very common practice in the UK for a number of years, far exceeding prevalence as a practice in the U.S. and other nations – so texting would be seen as a very routine and normal activity.
3. All names used in the analysis are pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.
4. Mediated-data were those data from the original field notes which had already been subjected to initial interpretations. Thus, they were no longer in the form of original field notes. This meant that the secondary authors were not analysing data in its original field-note form; rather, they were analysing ‘mediated-data’ i.e. data combined with the initial interpretations of the first author and which was already organized into tentative themes.
5. The urban dictionary online defines the expression “Bender” as “British slang for a homosexual male. Someone who is bent, that is, not straight.”

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